

Caring for Our Common Home: An Ecumenical and Interreligious Concern

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Comments on the encyclical letter Laudato Si' of Pope Francis

The encyclical – earth as common home

The subtitle of the encyclical letter says it clearly: Care for the earth as our common home. It has been received as a strong voice of our common crisis and common *hope*. The criterion of this hope is love for the whole earth and all human beings.

“Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.” Pope Francis cites this verse of the famous canticle of Saint Francis of Assisi in the first paragraph of the encyclical. It speaks of an intimate family relationship of mutual care and love between us as human beings and the entire web of life in an interdependent world. The one human family is part of the wider family of all creatures of God that have their common home on planet earth.

The World Council of Churches, as a fellowship of 350 Orthodox, Protestant, and Anglican churches representing half a billion people, has also spoken in many of its documents during the last four decades about climate change and eco-justice, on the earth as home for all living creatures, living in different spaces or habitats but linked to each other in a web of relationships. The human community is placed within the wider community of the earth, which is embedded in God's household of life. *Economy* – the order of the house, *ecology* – the logic of the house, and *oikoumene* – the inhabited earth and household of life that we share, these concepts all refer to the same Greek root, *oikos* – the house or the common home. The WCC began to promote the vision of a just and sustainable society already in 1974. Since 1983 the WCC has energized the churches' witness for the care for creation through a broad process on justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

Care for peace, justice and the common good of the human family and the care for the well-being of all life in love and solidarity are concerns of *all* people, whatever religion we belong to. The encyclical therefore is addressed to all people and not to Christians only, to all walks of life and not just to religious leaders, politicians, business men or women or scientists. Opening this wider horizon, the encyclical has necessarily an ecumenical and inter-religious appeal and calls for intentional cooperation. We have also seen that many religious communities, locally and globally, have welcomed this text from Pope Francis. Hardly any document of any pope has been received with the same enthusiasm in other churches, perhaps more even than *within* the Catholic church itself. I do not know of any document that has united Christian churches so much in these last years. It is referred to everywhere. In our member churches, the echoes have been very strong and enthusiastic. Before the COP21 meeting we also saw how Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist leaders globally also made statements that are parallel to the some of the messages of *Laudato Si'*.

Confronted with a global crisis of life that has political, economic, ecological, social, cultural and religious dimensions, we begin to see the deep need for change and transformation to sustain life on our planet. The encyclical opens our eyes to the deeper reasons for the crisis, finding them in a misguided and misleading development paradigm coupled with indifference to the suffering of human sisters and brothers in a throwaway culture. With its comprehensive approach, the encyclical calls for a new global consensus (para 164) on the interrelated concerns for sustainable agriculture, the development of renewable and less polluting forms of energy, the promotion of energy-efficiency, clean water for all, and better management of the earth's resources.

The right to hope

Pointing to the deeper reasons for the crisis, the encyclical shows opportunities for change. Pope Francis underlines (para 13): "We know that things can change. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home." Let me explore the options and opportunities for change further. First, I would like to say more about hope as power to change. And second, I would like to make some concrete proposals for the follow-up to the Paris agreement.

There are reasons to hope. In the preparatory process toward Paris we saw positive signs of change. All over Europe and in other regions of the world, people participated in pilgrimages of climate – justice that the WCC inspired and initiated as an element of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, which is the overarching programme emphasis of the WCC. We could show the close cooperation and common message of many religious leaders of all major faith communities. We could present 1,780,000 signatures, including those of many young people, calling for a fair and just agreement. During and after COP 21, many more organizations and even a big insurance company went for divestment in fossil-fuel industries and re-investment in renewables and clean energy production.

Sharing such signs of hope is not only a matter of mutual psychological and spiritual encouragement. **To nurture hope is a fundamental ethical principle in any human relation. It is not a matter of being purely optimistic, or even unrealistic or ignoring risks and problems. It is rather a matter of identifying those realities that are authentic signs of hope. To fail in sustaining one another's hope in any way, or even to destroy the hope of the other, is to take the meaning out of their work or lives. Who has the right to do that?**

All human beings have a right to hope. Faith in God, who desires fullness of life for all of humanity, is a way to relate to the world as it is with the conviction and the commitment that something more and better is possible than what we can observe immediately. This is one contribution to hope. Therefore we also need to renew a theology of hope. A relevant question in the critique of religion is: are religions and religious leaders conveying hope for all?

The human rights to food, clean water and air, health services and more are already limited or violated by climate change for many people in the world. Who has the right to take away the hope of a future where the next generations can enjoy life in its abundance on this planet?

Moral perspectives in public debate are often framed in terms of what has gone wrong, who ought to be held responsible, defining the bad or even evil acts to be condemned, pointing out the injustices in places of power and certain structures, and identifying the catalysts of violence and conflicts. However, moral perspectives in public debate can and should do more to point to what is good, naming the better alternatives, and showing what responsible and sustainable actions are possible. I think one of the strong dimensions of *Laudato Si'* is that it does offer both

critique that is deep in its analysis of what is wrong but also credible expressions of profound hope.

Post-Paris situation

The time has come to do the right thing and to leave the fossil-based economic development path behind us. The time has come to start a process of efficient decarbonization of the economy and parallel changes in the lifestyle of affluent societies.

For many reasons *investments are being pulled out of coal mining* and in some cases from the oil and gas industry, at least from the most costly projects. The demand and market for renewable energy is growing rapidly. The cost of solar energy is decreasing at a rate much faster than expected. Possibilities for developing local renewable energy production are emerging everywhere. The potential for developing new technologies for energy production, and with them new approaches for transport and production, are enormous. Willingness in the business and finance sector to invest in these developments is also growing fast. The meeting next week in Davos of the World Economic Forum is a unique opportunity for leaders of business and finance to show whether they are ready to embark on contributions to a better future for all. Both political leaders and civil society should also find new ways to encourage others to do what will serve our common home. In Norwegian we say: the snowball is rolling, faster and bigger every day. Indeed, the momentum toward change has come, and it might be stronger than we know.

If we have passed the tipping point, what is then the contribution from civil society representatives? I see first of all a reinforcement of the call for *collaboration between all actors*: politicians, leaders of the finance and business sectors, employees, the civil society movements, the religious communities, the education systems, the local communities, individuals. We need to collaborate now to make it happen fast enough to forestall irremediable climate change.

It is time for those who shape the moral discourse about sustainable values for the earth as our common home and the human family to point more to the *possibilities* existing presently to do what serves the future of our planet. Furthermore, moral discourse has to be focused on how to make decisions about the climate grounded in principles of justice and for the benefit of all. This is not the time to make the rich countries more sustainable and the poor and undeveloped countries and communities burdened with the problems and the solutions of the past. That is dangerous for the whole world, not only for the most vulnerable. Development is possible without damaging the environment and without widening the gap between rich and poor.

We need to move forward recognizing the fundamental premises of climate justice not only in a north-south perspective but also in an inter-generational perspective. Additionally, there is need for constant re-evaluation according to changing realities of access to cheap renewable energy, and according to the momentum of change. To actualize the new future that is possible, international agreements must provide incentives to investment in poor countries, or in countries that have enormous needs of energy due to the size of their populations.

We have reasons for hope because changes are happening already. Many are changing their priorities and their life styles to protect the earth. Many are with us, physically or symbolically, on a pilgrimage of climate justice and peace. Many in the financial and business sectors are changing their investments and practices. They are turning toward de-carbonization, renewable energy, and new methods of production and transportation.

We believe that we have the potential to do what is just for the poor, those who contribute the least to emissions yet suffer the most. We believe that we have this responsibility from God, the creator. But God has also given us the capacity to change.

So we have hope. We have reasons to hope. We have the right to hope. Therefore, I also say, as a person of faith, praise God—*Laudato Si!*